Fuji Television

Comic-Kaze TV

At High Noon, Japan Cracks Up

Live and largely unplanned, the nation's most popular daytime show hooks 20 million viewers with a wacky blend of pet tricks, eating contests and celebrity encounters

By Dave Spector

Host Tamori (above, left) invites the audience to "Go ahead and laugh!"

A burly female pro wrestler stalks across the stage swinging a heavy chain. A slim young man, a singer, scurries away in terror while the TV show's host tries, unsuccessfully, to restrain the wrestler. A moment later, the wrestler grabs the young man, hurls him to the floor, tears down a piece of scenery and throws it on top of him. Before you can say "*Waratte-iito-mo!*" she's stomping on the scenery →

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with the helpless youth beneath it. Is it some kind of joke, or is it real? On this show, one can't be sure.

Waratte-iitomo! is the most popular daytime program on Japanese television. It's chaotic, unrehearsed and often downright sloppy, but between noon and 1 P.M., at least 20 million hard-working Japanese drop everything to watch it. A favorite Japanese joke these days is that if Emperor Hirohito ever has to make another surrender announcement, he'll make it on *Go Ahead and Laugh!*, which is what the title means in English.

The show has been on the air for nearly three years. Its host is a former insurance salesman who calls himself Tamori. He is blind in one eye, wears dark glasses and has slicked-down hair. Tamori says his career in insurance has been a big help to him as a television host. "At least I can relate to everyday things. I know people who grew up in show business and have never bought their own plane tickets."

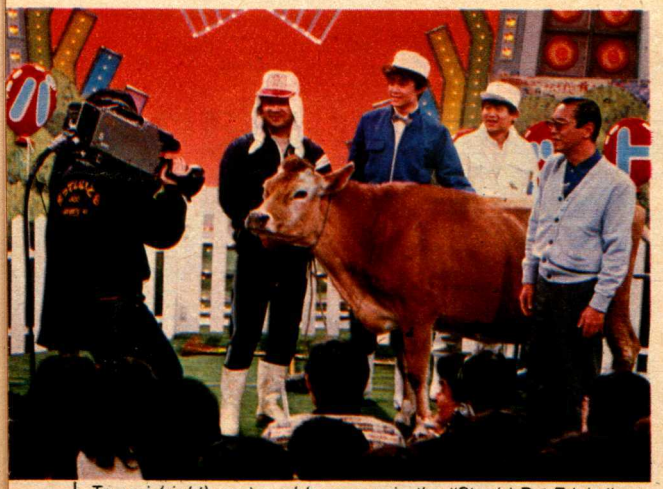
Certainly part of the show's charm is its unpredictability. It is live, like most of Japanese daytime TV, but it is also virtually unplanned. The few plans that are made are often upset by guests with their own firm ideas about how things should go. A famous novelist came on the show and refused to end her interview. When she had been on for nearly 40 minutes, bumping those waiting to appear, a comedian ran out and told her, in words that are now famous in Japan, "Go home already." The novelist died soon after, and to this day nobody knows if her strange behavior was caused by heavy medication or if she was, in fact, playing a brilliant joke on the program.

On another occasion, a farmer brought his cow to the show. The cow could do a trick: it could lift one leg, dog fashion, when urinating. Not a bad trick for a cow. Unfortunately, the animal got overexcited and exhibited another bodily function the producers had not counted on. Tamori covered the situation by telling the audience: "Luckily for you people in the front row, we're going to cancel the tap-dance number."

The program is sort of a combination of *Late Night with David Letterman* and *The Gong Show*. It consists of a series of regular segments, many of which don't stay around long. Recently, Japanese viewers have been treated to a week of messy eating contests, featuring everything from sushi to noodles, and a week of housewife arm-wrestling matches, at which Tamori counts out the loser in English. Don't ask why.

The "Stupid Pet Tricks" segment was actually stolen from Letterman at my suggestion. Currently working in Japan as production supervisor for *Ripley's Believe It or Not!*, I appear on *Waratte-iitomo!* about once a week, usually in a segment called "Foreigners' Corner," a mock game show in which non-Japanese try to explain the meaning of Japanese proverbs, customs and objects. We try to be funny, but we often bomb.

Once, on the show, I →



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Tamori (right) upstaged by a cow in the "Stupid Pet Tricks" segment of the show.

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was discussing a baseball team sponsored by a meatpacking company. The team has the unglamorous name of Nippon Hams, so I said, "What's even worse, I hear this season they're making the players wear pineapple rings on their heads." Silence. I learned afterward that no one in Japan had ever heard of putting pineapple rings on ham. But cultural differences work both ways. There's a classic Tamori crack about a hyperactive comedian: "You're like a 100-watt bulb in a bathroom—a waste of energy." It's funny in Japan where they've always conserved energy, but it wouldn't work in America.

The most popular part of the show is called, in both English and Japanese, "Telephone Shocking." What they really mean is "Telephone Surprise"—the Japanese love the English language, but subtle differences between words often escape them. Basically a 15-minute celebrity interview, it is the only segment that appears on the show every day. At the end of the interview, the celebrity calls an acquaintance on the phone and asks him or her to appear on the show the next day. It saves the staff the tiresome job of booking guests.

So far, nearly 700 people have been interviewed. The chain-letter aspect of the feature means that it moves along in spurts. A series of Kabuki actors one week may lead to a string of rock singers who in turn give the baton to a run of comedians. But everyone wants to be on. It's an "in" thing to do among Japanese entertainers.

Sometimes the telephone calls actually are "shocking," particularly if the recipient is not prepared. One actor, unaware that the call was being heard by millions, revealed that he had spent the night in a hotel room with a woman who wasn't his wife. Another celebrity dialed a wrong number and got a housewife. Tamori decided the only fair thing to do was to invite her on the show the next day.

The segment ends with a bit of *shtick* that has become a national ritual. The guest recites a motto: "A friend of a friend is everyone's friend. Let's spread friendship around the world in one big circle!" At the final word, all the people in the audience make circles above their heads with their arms and yell out, "*Wa*!" which means circle. Even toddlers watching at home join in.

The studio audience is small, only 180, and 95 per cent of them are women, mostly young. This is no accident. There's a Japanese saying to the effect that "a girl will laugh if a chopstick falls to the floor," and the producers like to have an audience that's not afraid to giggle. So many post cards requesting tickets flood the office that the staff has long since given up counting them. The show's budget is a modest $20,000 per episode, and that includes Tamori's salary, reported to be $6000 per show. The staff works in factory-like surroundings: it's apparent that glamorous trappings are not part of the Japanese television world.

Even so, visiting Hollywood stars like to appear on the program, almost always with an interpreter. Dustin Hoffman started the trend when he arrived to promote "Tootsie." Sukeharu Nashiki, publicity manager in Japan for Columbia Pictures, recalls: "We were warned that Hoffman could be temperamental. But as soon as he got to the studio, you could tell he picked up on the show's contagious appeal. He was so elated over getting laughs with Tamori that the rest of his trip was a pleasure."

Noriyuki "Pat" Morita came on the program to promote "The Karate Kid." He loved it. "What a happy show!" he shouted repeatedly, shaking his head in amazement at the casualness of it all. After years of working in thoroughly planned, carefully rehearsed shows, he found the Japanese delightfully free from the traps of Hollywood-style overproduction. At the end of the program, Morita was nearly knocked over by a moving set: while the credits for *Waratte-iitomo!* are rolling, a crew is readying the next live show, due to start in the same studio after just three minutes of commercials.

"Crazy, man. This bunch is crazy," Morita said as he edged his way off the stage. (END)